

Exams are returning for new high school students, but province wants 'consistency'

The Record | September 29, 2025 | Robert Williams

Students in Grades 9 and 10 will write exams this year for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic began in early 2020.

Both the Waterloo Region District School Board and Waterloo Catholic District School Board have implemented new policies that place more of an emphasis on end-of-course evaluations, but stop short of mandating a return of exams in all courses for students.

"For the last 5 school years, Grade 9 and 10 students have not had mandatory evaluations during the four designated final evaluations/exam days at the end of the semester. This evaluation policy is changing this year," a memo posted online by the Waterloo Region District School Board reads. "Grade 9 and 10 students in compulsory courses will have an in-class component and a scheduled final evaluation, which may be an examination or another evaluation product."

The evaluations can include examinations and tests, but can also take the form of presentations, projects, written assessments or other activities.

Compulsory courses are limited to English, math, science, geography and French in Grade 9, and English, math, science and history in Grade 10.

"Curriculum expectations drive what teachers are evaluating and assessing during those days, but it is left up to their professional judgment as to which assessments they will use," board director Scott Miller told The Record. "They know their students the best and they want to ensure that their students are able to demonstrate their learning to the best of their abilities."

The Waterloo Catholic District School Board is taking a slightly different approach.

It will allow each department the opportunity to include exams as part of students' final evaluations, up to a maximum of 10 per cent of the total grade.

Within each school, departments are expected to apply their decisions consistently across all applicable courses, said Catholic board spokesperson Lema Salaymeh.

"It is important to note that a final exam in these courses is not mandatory, but has been reinstated as one of the tools available to teachers as part of a balanced approach to assessment," said Salaymeh.

"This decision reflects both provincial direction and our commitment to ensuring students are prepared for the demands of senior-level courses and post-secondary pathways."

Pandemic changes linger

As school boards across Ontario navigated lockdowns and other public health protocols between 2020 and 2022, exams were one of the first casualties of the new academic order.

As protocols abated and in-person learning once again became the norm, exams returned at both the public and Catholic boards during the 2022-23 school year, but only for students in Grades 11 and 12.

In Ontario, the final grade for a course is usually composed of a mandatory weighting by the Ministry of Education, with 30 per cent of the course being based on a final evaluation and 70 per cent of the grade based on evaluations that have happened throughout the semester.

That hasn't technically been the case since at least 2020 for students in Grades 9 and 10.

Instead of exams, Miller said, evaluation days over the last few years at the public board were used to help students who had missed assignments or hadn't handed work in to ensure those students were in school and could get their credits for the course.

Since last spring, Miller added, the school board has been working on a "shift" to return "some type of evaluation during those evaluation days."

These new changes were developed based on feedback from various stakeholders, he said, and were not necessarily in reaction to any pending provincial policy changes.

Province wants exams back

The return of exams for all high school students has been a priority for Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government and its "back-to-basics" campaign in education.

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board, for example, was one of four school boards in Ontario that had a supervisor appointed by the province after recent investigations showed they each had accumulated deficits.

When Robert Plamondon began in his new role overseeing the board earlier this year, one of the first changes he announced was to bring back exams for Grades 9 and 10 students after they had been replaced with the less-stringent evaluation days.

"Although the (Ottawa-Carleton board) has had final evaluations in Grades 9 and 10, those evaluations have not included a final exam, which will better prepare them for more consequential evaluations in Grades 11 and 12," Plamondon told CTV in July. "Following a review of our Student Success Days and feedback from teachers and parents, I have directed staff to reintroduce exams or summative assessments in Grades 9 and 10, beginning in September 2025. This practice will ensure students are prepared for their next courses or post-secondary pursuits."

In a statement sent to The Record from Education Minister Paul Calandra's press secretary, Emma Testani, she said Calandra is in "complete disagreement" with any school board not conducting exams in Grades 9 and 10.

"Student achievement is paramount, and preparing students for the jobs of tomorrow requires proper assessment," Testani said.

"Our government is reviewing the exam policy across the province to ensure consistency and strengthen achievement. We will continue to support student success and provide teachers with the resources they need. If boards fail to act in the best interests of students, we will not hesitate to step in."

Both boards in Waterloo Region will move forward with their intended changes unless told differently from the province.

Salaymeh said the pandemic created "unique learning disruptions" for this cohort of students, and by providing the option of exams in Grades 9 and 10, they are helping students "gradually build the skills and confidence needed" to navigate formal assessments successfully.

"As the Ministry of Education updates the Growing Success document, we will align our practices with any new guidelines and continue to support educators in their work with students," she said.

Robert Williams is a reporter for the Waterloo Region Record. Reach him at robertwilliams@torstar.ca.